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An Unchained Analysis of Racial Tension in America

Introduction

Quentin Tarantino presents *Django Unchained* (2012) as a Post-Western, slave narrative that offers vengeance and redemption through the unlikely pair of Django, a freed slave portrayed by Jamie Fox, and Dr. King Shultz, a German immigrant bounty hunter played by Christoph Waltz. At the start of the film, Shultz comes upon a chain gang of slaves who are being transported through a forest. Shultz, as a bounty hunter, is looking for Django to help him identify a couple of wanted men. Shultz offers to free Django after the bounty is collected, and they set out to find these men and split the reward. After they are successful, Django is freed and becomes Shultz's apprentice. Together they embark on a journey to find and free Django's wife, another slave who was sold away from Django as punishment years before. *Django Unchained*, released in an era of struggle over police brutality and racial tension, is an important piece that can be studied for its insight into society as well as its influence from and contribution to the development of black cinema. Although the film can be analyzed in this way, critics largely found it abhorrent. It has been called historically inaccurate and voyeuristically violent, and Tarantino has himself been called the offspring of D. W. Griffith. Yet, is it possible that *Django Unchained* can be read differently? Could we use this film as a tool to foster understanding and insight into how we can evolve race relations within the United States? James Baldwin said, "The greatest difficulty that we face is first of all to

excavate our actual history. And I am part of the history which occurred in the Caribbean, and you are part of the history which occurred in Harlem. And one's got to find the terms. One's got to accept that and find out how to use that" ("Baldwin's"). The goal of this paper is to study the *Django* in a way in which its critics did not and to understand film as a tool for social change.

Historically, black Americans have faced torture, segregation, discrimination, and both individual and institutional racism in this country; the film industry is no exception to this rule. From early cinema and *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) through today's releases, those who study the medium's handling of race argue over the under-representation, and misrepresentation, of black Americans within the industry. Cecilia Kang, Krissah Thompson, and Drew Harwell of the Washington Post reported on this issue:

In the five decades since Harlem-based Rep. Adam Clayton Powell held congressional hearings on discrimination in Hollywood, a persistent racial gap exists between what's viewed on screen and reality. Minorities make up more than 36 percent of the U.S. population but represented only 10 percent of lead characters in movies and sat in 12 percent of director's chairs in 2011, the last year for which data is available. (Kang, Thompson, and Harwell).

Most recently, this can be seen in the public debate over the 2016 Academy Awards nominations lack of diversity. This – followed by the hashtag #OscarSoWhite and boycott of the awards by major stars such as Jada Pinkett Smith and Spike Lee – is proof of the racial tension that still permeates in our society and the media and entertainment industries. While reflection upon the past can leave no doubt about the racist and stereotyped representation of blacks, it is up to debate whether the intentions and

unconscious results of contemporary filmmaking are helping or hurting the movements towards true equality.

The evolution of the role of black cinema in American film culture is inseparable from the larger development of American society, economy, and political thought. We can see these connections develop in terms of four key periods of American black cinematic history. In early American cinema, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is representative of the racist films that eventually fueled an independent black cinema movement. In the 1970s, this movement developed into the highly stylized and political Blaxploitation genre. Following this, in the 1980s and 1990s, Spike Lee represents the growth and popularity of the black independent cinema movement. Finally, in our current period, white film makers are increasingly producing films explicitly engaging with race (e.g. *Crash*, *Monster's Ball*, *The Help*, etc.) which are often met with intense criticism, like that directed at Quentin Tarantino, particularly for his *Django Unchained* (2012). This paper explores the importance of *Django Unchained* in contemporary society, and, ultimately, how the film can be used potentially as a tool to influence how we perceive the role of whites in the struggle for black equality in America. I will begin with a discussion of the history of black independent cinema's development in the US. Then, I will turn to a discussion of the criticisms of *Django Unchained* which accuse it of setting back American race relations and civil rights politics. In the end, I argue that a paradigm shift must take place within film that allows black film as a space to reach white audiences, and this shift starts with films like *Django Unchained*.

History of Black Independent Cinema

The representation of race in American cinema has been traced to the early days of the medium with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. America's first blockbuster, and one of the top 100 grossing films of all time, was adapted from a novel "[promoting] white supremacy, terror against persons of color, and race separation" and the idea that "black people can and should never hold positions of worth, responsibility, or power (Navarro 1388-1389). The film not only created a spark in the American white population which led to an increase in lynching and Klan membership, but it left a lasting blemish on the American unconscious (1389). Though the film may have succeeded in some ways, it backfired in others. The film resulted in the first nationwide NAACP protests and boycotts, black and white Americans marching on theatres which caused some cancellations, and W. E. B. Du Bois writing the book Black Reconstruction to combat the film's message (Katz). Protests and boycotts aside, the most important and unintended result of *The Birth of a Nation* was a spark in the creation of the black film industry that led to Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) (Navarro 1390).

Film scholar, Mary Lynn Navarro, explains the phenomena of the early stereotypical black characters in Hollywood cinema. She pulls from examples of many historical representations calling them "[preconceived] identities that [are] easy for white folks to understand and accept," which create a "deeper [marginalization] of African American[s]" (Navarro 1391). She explains, "The viewer enters into the subjectivity of the cinematic character through a process of identification. When the image is grossly distorted, the subject has no entry point into the character" (1392). These characters are so one-dimensional that it is impossible for anyone to identify with them; it is impossible both for the black Americans that the characters supposedly

represent as well as the white Americans who could gain understanding through those insights. It is essential to consider this point of view while analyzing the reviews of *Django Unchained*. Many of the critics' arguments are based on the notion that white filmmakers in Hollywood are incapable of creating stories that can be viewed, understood, and related to by both black and white audiences. It is also important to consider this phenomenon in mainstream cinema and how it was challenged in black independent cinema.

The greatest issue in the emergence of black cinema is the lack of financial support for independent, especially black, filmmakers. Hollywood's need and fascination with blockbusters led to the overshadowing of independent cinema, and the "block booking system [prevented] independently produced films from reaching movie theaters and large audiences" (Diawara 4). This lack of financial support can be linked to the style and content of the early black cinema. These films, created and viewed by black Americans, were presented in a way that was hard to digest for some white Americans. The aesthetics were "metafilmic, often nationalistic, and not 'pleasurable' to consumers accustomed to mainstream Hollywood products" (Diawara 5). These pulp-y, mostly low-budget, films had a majority of black characters, included interpretations of black vernacular style, and had plots incorporating racism and racial struggle. However difficult it was to produce and distribute these films, the post-Civil Rights period (1968-present) in America resulted in a growing audience for black films, and with this growing audience came better opportunities for producing them.

This anti-mainstream, dissident style came to be known as Blaxploitation. Blaxploitation was the result of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited job bias in favor of whites. In 1969, the Equal Opportunity Commission investigated the industry

and the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers, which managed labor, and found, “clear evidence of a pattern or practice of discrimination.” The Justice department prepared lawsuits but settled on a two-year voluntary goal of twenty percent minority employment (Quinn 88). This led to short-term rise in the employment of blacks within the industry. Blaxploitation and the introduction of the black male hero first caught fire in 1971 with the release of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971). Toni Cade Bambara describes it as a “depiction of the black community as downpressed and in need of rescue” (Bambara 118). Blaxploitation coincides with “Third Cinema,” which developed first in the so-called “Third” or “developing” World and is defined by its socialist politics and contributions to the “social and cultural emancipations” of undeveloped areas (Wayne 2). In line with the Third Cinema movement in the late 1970s, independent filmmakers sought to create a type of cinema that would present an experience not fueled by consumerism or an imperialist system (Bambara 120).

In the early 1970s, led by the film *Super Fly* (Parks Jr., 1972) – which is considered one of the most culturally influential Blaxploitation films – major distribution of black independent films became a possibility. As a result, there was a lot of criticism regarding white influence on the final products. Specifically, *Super Fly* was directed and written by African Americans but made by a white producer, Sigismond Shore (Quinn 89). Shore’s involvement was a complicated affair. In order to finance the film, “The filmmakers went directly to the Harlem business community (the milieu of the film’s setting) to raise the initial production costs” (90). The community was involved in the production and therefore had more influence over the film than a distribution company. Aside from the financing, there is an even more important issue

with the concern over the impact of white filmmakers on a black story. It is easy and common to suggest that a black director and writer should be more knowledgeable about the content and context of the film. Yet, Eithne Quinn, Senior Lecturer in American Studies at Manchester University, argues, “It would be misleading to construct black creative input as in any simple way authentic. As with much of the black participation in Blaxploitation films, *Super Fly*’s African American writer and director were not from the places they portrayed. Indeed, ironically, it was only the white producer who hailed from Harlem” (91). The case of *Super Fly* can be used to consider the idea that context and motivation can play a more important role than race alone in filmmaking.

After the two-year industry agreement over minority employment expired—along with the election of Nixon in 1968 contributing to “political backpedaling”—the struggle to integrate Hollywood was all but halted (Quinn 103). Spike Lee, however, is often described as reigniting the black independent cinema movement. In the 1980s, Lee led African American cinema into a contemporary era that revolutionized the movement. Amiri Baraka describes Lee and his style:

Spike Lee expresses for me a recognizable type and trend in American society.

He is the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile,

Black, petite bourgeois professional. Broadened, he is an American trend.

Emerging as an indication of social and class motion, his development is expressed as a political economy, culture, and history. (Baraka 146).

Spike Lee had become a force in the 1980s that gave voice back to black independent cinema. His forward, in-your-face style combined the unique approach of the Blaxploitation film with contemporary culture and themes. Not only were his films

respected and praised by the black community, but they were also well received almost across the board. *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), Lee's first independent feature, introduced him as "the strongest and most consistent force in this movement" (Antonio 2).

Some aspects of black cinema have often used film as "a research tool" to bring attention to the issues that black communities face in America (Diawara 5). These films represent narratives of criticism and empowerment and are "artistic [reconstructions] of archival footage and 'real' events" (5). They provide a look inside black culture that is not seen in Hollywood representations. The main goal of the independent black cinema of the late-20th century was the creation and maintenance of a "politically revolutionary" and "completely independent...African-American film movement/industry" (Baraka 145-146).

It is important to note the timing of these essential periods in black American film history. These movements generally happen throughout periods of economic instability and as responses towards current events. Ed Guerrero of New York University has recognized that the "[Blaxploitation and contemporary black] film waves arose during periods of economic crisis and downturn in the film industry earnings" (164). Black independent cinema has made it a point to criticize and call attention to "how the priorities on the national agenda are expressed, mediated, amended, and experienced, based on race, gender, and class" (Antonio 2). As these periods of economic instability arise again, the growth of poverty in contemporary American life creates a realization of these issues. This, then, creates a demand for stories that challenge these issues and offer a cathartic element to the viewers. For an analysis of *Django Unchained* and its impact on contemporary society, this economic instability

creates even ground on which black and white Americans can meet to move towards the future. These times of instability are experienced across almost all classes. The most recent economic recession in 2008 left the country in turmoil and created a window for this critical analysis through film.

In addition to Blaxploitation, *Django Unchained* is also heavily influenced by the western. The early western is often considered a dead genre by some and slavery a dead topic by others. True, there have been countless narratives about both and their face value may seem to have been declined, but, “the ‘recyclability’ of past texts [gives] rise to an inheritance of imagery and narrative reused and revalued in ways that challenge” (Campbell 22). The early Western genre combined and modernized the ideas of knights, codes of honor, and heroism. The first Western, *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903) established the genre during the early days of cinema and focused on a “fascination” with Native Americans. Once the industry moved to Hollywood, the look of the genre and focus on Indians was traded for desert and the Western hero (Indick 177). As the genre has evolved into the Post-Western, there have been ideas that have remained the same, such as “the performative masculinity of being ‘a real man’,” “the allure of rugged individualism,” and “violent outlaws as forces of difference and indifference” (Alexander 228); however, the character types have begun to evolve themselves.

While the heroes still exist, especially the antiheroes, the genre’s whitewashing has faded. Bryant Keith Alexander, professor and dean of the College of Communication and Fine Arts at Loyola Marymount University, points out that Black cowboys really did exist “outside of the Hollywood imagining of an all-White Old West” (Alexander 229). One such example is present in Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992),

as William Munny (Eastwood) is joined by his old partner and friend, Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman). This Post-Western mindset creates an aesthetic challenge to the old genre, but more importantly, the Post-Western challenges “the structures of power and of feeling [police] order (Campbell 354).

It is a combination of these histories in filmmaking—histories that heavily influenced Tarantino in much of his work—and American antebellum history that supplied the context for *Django Unchained*. The filmic history allows a background of understanding in how the styles of Blaxploitation and the Post-Western are still relevant and politically charged. Tarantino utilizes these styles in a way that further challenges mainstream cinema to create stories for black and white audiences that deal with more difficult subject matter. The influence of American history on *Django* introduces a subject matter that had remained largely untouched in cinema. This taboo topic – combined with these genres and Tarantino’s usual habit of creating the most offensive material possible – created a whirlwind of criticism and attention surrounding the film.

The Reviews of *Django Unchained*

Tarantino’s film has elicited a mix of reactions from many different types of audiences. Some dissenters argue that he is an artist, not a historian. Others compare him to D.W. Griffith and call his film an outrage to the country’s progress towards racial understanding and equality. Indeed, in either case, the symbolic and political nature of film cannot be ignored. No story can be taken at face value. Jacques Rancie`re explains, “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions,’ that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done” (39). What Tarantino

achieves in *Django Unchained* is a violent reaction from the audience towards the shocking images in the film.

In *Django*, there are two main instances of slave violence that critics point to with distaste: the Mandingo fight and a dog attack. The Mandingo fight consists of two slaves in a human cockfight to the death. The graphic scene depicts an act that is completely fictional but symbolically reinforces the brutality of American slavery, where slaves were used as property and exploited for their strength. The other scene happens when an escaped Mandingo fighter is caught and punished. Because the slave no longer wishes to fight, his owner, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), orders that the dogs attack the slave. The theatrics and stereotypes in this film cannot be overlooked, but they are also what potentially create a digestible and repulsive recreation of America's scarred past and a bridge between that past and America's present. Moon Charania of Tulane University writes that framing the idea of "white-on-black violence...at the threshold of black emancipation allows black-on-white violence to be not just palatable, but enjoyable and even humorous" (59). The buildup of such monstrous scenes makes the audience root for Django's success and cheer when he defeats Candie and the others at the plantation.

Charania does argue that Tarantino has a tendency towards an "audacious fusion of gratuitous violence, clever pop culture, and independent art-house cinema (rather than, say, historical accuracy or ethical polemics)" (58). Alternately, Rancie`re refutes the idea that history and fiction are incompatible:

There are two problems here that certain people confuse in order to construct the phantom of a historical reality that would solely be made up of 'fictions'. The first problem concerns the relationship between history and historicity, that is to say

the relationship of the historical agent to the speaking being. The second problem concerns the idea of fiction and the relationship between ... fictional rationality and the modes of explanation used for historical and social reality, the relationship between the logic of fiction and the logic of facts. (Rancie`re 35).

The reviews are attempting to analyze *Django* as an historical film while *Django* is attempting to push the audience in a new direction which has very little to do with historical fact. The fiction that exists within the film is used to explain a more contemporary reality to the audience.

Dr. Mary Lynn Navarro presented a paper at the National Association of African American Studies Conference in 2013 in which she greatly criticizes *Django Unchained* and compares Tarantino to D.W. Griffith. She argues, “Tarantino de-centers race recasting its theme into a vintage Spaghetti Western action movie with a touch of Blaxploitation and some Mel Brook’s type humor” (1401). She continues by claiming that the film’s representation of white men as evil is overshadowed by the fact that “it is not clear that good wins” and that “playing slave against slave, brother against brother...is actually setting us back in time” (1401). While Tarantino may have played loosely with the historical representations of the past, I think his highest achievement in *Django* is that he is able to realistically represent human character. The head house slave – Stephen, played by Samuel L Jackson – in Candie’s “Candieland” has a nasty personality and unfailing loyalty to his master. He participates in the punishment of the other slaves and acts as if he is one of the slave owners. The “house slave” and “field slave” were historically present in the pre-Civil War south. Malcom X gave a speech at Michigan State University in 1963 to discuss the concept of the house slave:

When you read about him in history during slavery he was called "Uncle Tom." He was the house Negro. And during slavery you had two Negroes. You had the house Negro and the field Negro. The house Negro usually lived close to his master. He dressed like his master. He wore his master's second-hand clothes. He ate food that his master left on the table. And he lived in his master's house... So whenever that house Negro identified himself, he always identified himself in the same sense that his master identified himself. When his master said, "We have good food," the house Negro would say, "Yes, we have plenty of good food." "We" have plenty of good food...When the master would be sick, the house Negro identified himself so much with his master he'd say, "What's the matter boss, we sick?" His master's pain was his pain...When the house started burning down, that type of Negro would fight harder to put the master's house out than the master himself would. (X).

This is perhaps the most important argument against Navarro's harsh take on *Django*. House slaves were pitted against field slaves in real life. Good does not always clearly win in real life.

It is clear in Navarro's paper, like many other social critics of the film, she viewed *Django* on a purely superficial level. By looking at Tarantino as a white filmmaker attempting to tell a "black" story, those criticisms make a value judgment about the materials without digging any deeper, looking for alternative possibilities, or resistant readings. As Navarro continues to critique Tarantino in her paper, she makes the mistake of claiming:

Tarantino directs our focus to [Calvin] Candie's view, as if we are seeing from his subject position. In this view Candie espouses a racial superiority theory based

on phrenological differences between the Caucasian and a Negro skull; Django may be smarter but he is inferior to white –as eugenics and phrenology prove it. Tarantino has furthered [D. W.] Griffith's distortion. Griffith endorsed social Darwinism, racial purity...Tarantino, perhaps unwittingly delivers the same message. (1402).

Yes, Calvin Candie did use phrenology to explain why whites were superior to blacks. The element that seems to completely escape Navarro is that Calvin Candie is the villain in this story. He, the antagonist, must be defeated in order for Django, the protagonist, to win. Phrenology, like the house slave, is an historically accurate representation in the film. It is an oppressive idea that was used by white supremacists to justify slavery and segregation. By using these ideas, even without complete historical accuracy, Tarantino can frame a narrative that presents a reasonably realistic picture of what life would have been like in the Antebellum south. Navarro feels that just by virtue of seeing Candie's actions on screen, Tarantino is endorsing them. However, Tarantino presents Candie as the symbol for an era of broad villainy in America's history.

What the critics of *Django* also miss is that Dr. King Shultz, a German immigrant portrayed by Christoph Waltz, is a complex character that represents the white American's choice in contemporary society. Shultz's character is a play on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He is a bounty hunter who claims to be more concerned with money than race, but is revealed to detest slavery. He is defined by both his actions and motives; and like Martin Luther King, Jr., Shultz appears to act within acceptable culture but does not abide by it. He makes moves to improve the current situation by drawing people into a different and transformative view of their society. That is, he

recognizes that something has to be done to fix society and that people have to see a solution that is attractive.

Huey Newton, an early member of the Black Panther Party, understood that “it is necessary for the people who carry out a social revolution to represent the popular majority’s interests” (Hilliard and Weise 165). Critics argue that this addition of a white savior speaks to the belief that black Americans are incapable of saving themselves. However, I believe that Tarantino has created Shultz as a kind of intervention in the consciousness of American whites. However caricatured the other characters are, Shultz takes the catharsis of Blaxploitation and gives the idea of beating the oppressive forces a voice with which white people can relate and understand.

Conclusions

While there is a long line of people waiting to criticize Tarantino’s *Django*, among other contemporary white and black films, it is important to notice the potential power of the film. For some critics, *Django* may be a way of setting the country back, but this could also set us forward. All the reviewers seem to miss the other possibilities of the film, and in the economic and social context of 2012 when the movie was released, and especially 2015 in the middle of world crises and race riots, this kind of intervention is important. It shatters the expected roles that we think everyone is supposed to play and gives voice to a rogue character, Shultz, who does not fit into stereotypes and is only interested in pursuing justice.

Django Unchained is representative of a paradigm shift in black and Blaxploitation storylines. The films that focused on catharsis and total rebellion against norms are moving from a niche market to a blockbuster market. At the same time, we

see a moment in history where people are supporting an uncompromising equality across the board. This equality is not just for blacks but is also seen in immigration rights and gay rights. *Django*'s release preceded the complicated time in America of support for equality at the same time that we see police repression and great inequality.

Tarantino is white, and he cannot completely understand black oppression. However, creating a world that is exclusive of culture and experience excludes the possibility of fostering empathy from others. There is a role that whites can, and absolutely need, to play in the evolution and reconciliation of America's conscience. James Baldwin has stressed that the race problem is not one that black people have to solve themselves. He wrote, "America, of all the Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and the obsolescence of the concept of color," and, "We, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation" (*The Fire* 93 and 97). Baldwin also said:

We have to discover how to reunite ourselves on terms on which we can speak to each other ... What you have to look at is what is happening in this country, and what is really happening is that brother has murdered brother knowing it was his brother. White men have lynched Negroes knowing them to be their sons. White women have had Negroes burned knowing them to be their lovers. It is not a racial problem. It's a problem of whether or not you are willing to look at your life and be responsible for it and then begin to change it ... And it is because the American people are unable to face the fact that in fact I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone, created by them. My blood, my father's blood is in that soil. They can't face that. ("Baldwin's").

Without whites, the idea of racial equality is simply a race war. Similarly to Dr. King Shultz' initial act of freeing Django, Huey Newton said, "in order to deal with [the imperialists] all we can do is liberate our community and then move on them as a collective force," and "because we cannot avoid contact with each other we will have to develop a value system that will help us function together in harmony" (Hilliard and Weise 174-175).

Tarantino successfully presents a world of two choices to the white audience – empathize with the significance of the black struggle and be on the side of Dr. Shultz, or stand by and let history repeat itself. Once Django is freed by Shultz, he has his own autonomy. He does not obey Shultz, but rather, they work together and save Django's wife. For what seems like the first time, Tarantino creates a film in which the white and black audiences can live inside the same story.

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